

What We Treasure and Who We Are

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Integrating disciplines is a powerful way to advocate for the social studies because it secures a place for the social studies within the busy school day. These are trying times for the social studies in the elementary school classroom. The current emphasis on reading and math, and more recently science, has had an adverse impact on the instructional time available for quality social studies instruction. This article describes how sharing historical and cultural artifacts can be used as a meaningful, interdisciplinary activity.

In my work with students from the elementary level to the university level, I have had success using historical and cultural artifacts to introduce social studies content, deepen historical and concept understanding, and to develop numerous literacy skills. Historical and cultural artifacts are objects that offer insight into an individual's

or group's way of life. I use an artifact assignment as a way to for students to introduce themselves, their personal histories, and their individual cultures to the group. As an activity for the beginning of the school year, sharing artifacts allows students to reveal a bit of valuable information about who they are. Furthermore, with the use of artifact sharing strategies described in this article, students of all ages can participate in a meaningful social studies activity, while sharpening their literacy skills at the same time. Sharing artifacts is a way to address the following thematic strands of the social studies curricular standards: **● Culture;** **● Time, Continuity, and Change;** **● People, Places, and Environments;** **● Individual Development and Identity;** **● Individuals, Groups, and Institutions;** and **● Global Connections.**

A further academic advantage in sharing historical and cultural artifacts with the suggested strategies relates to language arts integration. The National Council of Teachers of English has identified six standards for literacy development within the English language arts.² They are listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and visually representing. All of these activities can be developed as students learn to share artifacts.

Why Share Artifacts?

Sharing artifacts has many advantages as a teaching strategy in the social studies. It is an equitable assignment because all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status, can participate. When students bring in artifacts to

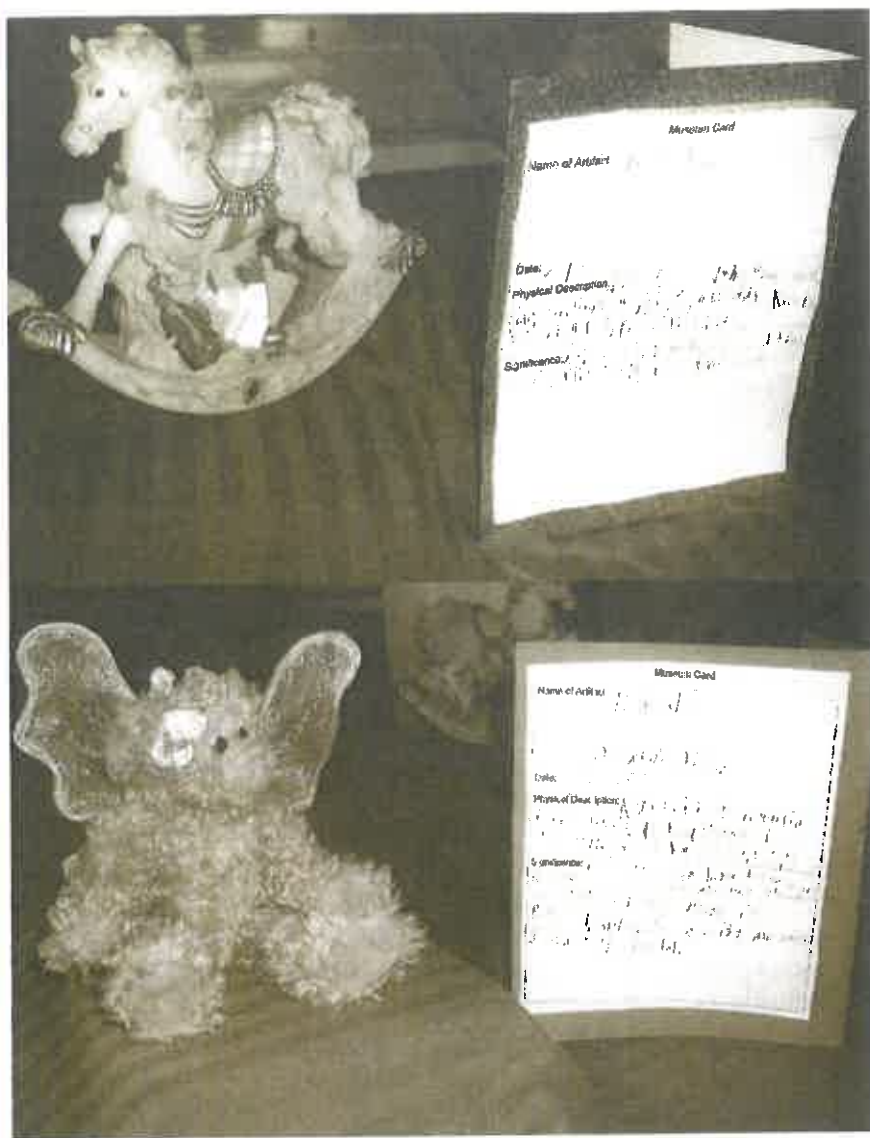
share, the linguistic and cultural traditions of the members of the class become a valued asset in classroom life. Often, students have trouble relating to the historical and cultural concepts described in textbooks. Sharing artifacts helps social studies learning become more meaningful because of the personal connections that are made and also because tangible, self-selected objects become the focus of the learning.

Introducing the Assignment

At the beginning of the school year I ask students to bring in a historical or cultural artifact that is significant to them. Often, I get puzzled expressions or reactions of uncertainty. When students are asked to bring artifacts

in, their first reaction is to say that they do not have any historical or cultural artifacts to share. I then ask students to first brainstorm what they think historical and cultural artifacts are. During the discussion, it becomes apparent that students (of all ages) immediately think of items like pottery shards, arrowheads, and fossilized bones as artifacts. So of course, they have nothing that constitutes an artifact to bring in to share.

To broaden the definition of "artifacts" into their minds, I pass out a different artifact from my own life to each student in the classroom. These artifacts can be mundane items like a keychain or a shell from a beach, as well as more personal items like a high school yearbook. Artifacts that I



share include a special family ring that belonged to my great-grandmother, some stories I wrote and illustrated when I was a child, and a punched tin piece of art from New Mexico.

I have each student write a physical description of the artifact, create a plausible story about its origins, and speculate about the date of the object. This portion of the activity, which involves both descriptive and creative writing, fulfills many language arts standards and benchmarks.

Then, as a whole-class activity, I ask students to stand at their desks, display their item, and read a portion of what they have written. After each student has spoken, I reveal the actual history

of that item and what it means to me. By the end of the exercise, which can take up to 30 minutes, the students have gotten the idea that they have been working with and examining *my* artifacts. They now have plenty of ideas related to what artifact they might bring in to share.

Creating Categories

To conclude this first lesson, I ask the class to think of broad categories into which the artifacts could be placed, and I list students' ideas on the board. Then I present a slide show that has my artifacts organized into groups such as costume jewelry, travel souvenirs, family documents, old photographs,

religious items, special collections, household items, gifts, childhood keepsakes, art, antiques, books and maps, tools, and special items of clothing. This slideshow reinforces the kinds of objects that students might choose to bring in and share as cultural and historical artifacts.

The next day, when students bring in their historical and cultural artifacts, there is a great deal of excitement. I rely on multiple sharing strategies so that we can develop different literacy skills. I also like to capitalize on the excitement of the students by creating numerous opportunities for sharing. The following sharing strategies have been very well received by my students of all ages. All of these sharing strategies develop the literacy skills of listening, speaking and viewing. The teacher can always enhance an activity by calling the class's attention to a specific artifact that has an interesting cultural or historical aspect.

Artifact Show and Tell

Artifact show and tell is like the traditional show and tell that elementary students love. Students come to the front of the class and talk about their artifact. During the show and tell, students articulate special memories about the item, and they have a chance to field questions from their peers. Limit the amount of time that any one student can speak so that every student has a chance, during a single lesson, to come to the front of the class to share. Additionally, the teacher must act cautiously with shy students, especially at the beginning of the year. Sharing historical and cultural artifacts can indeed foster community, but sometimes students are not ready to speak in front of the class. It may be possible for the teacher to have a quiet conversation with a young student, turning aside occasionally to address the whole class about the significance of the item.



Gallery Walk

The gallery walk is another common artifact sharing strategy. Artifacts are displayed as if they were in a museum, the students' desks serving as display tables. First, the teacher encourages students to think about how labels are helpful in describing museum artifacts to the viewer. Then, students fill in a museum card offering detailed information about their artifacts (as shown in photos). Museum cards and artifacts can be displayed together on a large table, or on the students' own desks, turning the classroom into a museum for a short while. Younger students can develop museum cards that show, in drawings, how the artifact is used, or where it came from. Once the museum is set up, the students can walk around and view the exhibits. This strategy relies on the language arts standards of reading, writing, and viewing. This sharing strategy takes

considerably less time than the artifact show and tell; however there is less opportunity for students to speak or ask questions.

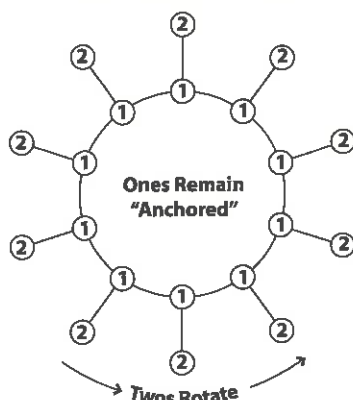
Inside-Outside Circle

The inside-outside circle is a great way to get all students talking about their historical and cultural artifacts within a set amount of time. Arrange the desks so that there is a cleared space in the center of the room. Separate the class into two equal groups, calling the groups the "ones" and the "twos." This is a listening based strategy because the students have to carefully listen to directions. Invite the "ones" to come with their artifacts in hand to the cleared space. The "ones" form a large circle, then turn and face outward. Tell the ones to "cast their anchors" because they will not move at all from this place during the exercise.

Then call the "twos" to come and

take a place in front of any "one." The students are now in pairs facing one another, arranged in two concentric circles. (If there is an odd number of children, then I will be one student's partner.) Next, the students take turns telling each other about their artifacts. After the student pairs have been talking for five minutes or so, call out a new set of directions. The teacher must first remind the "ones" that they anchored in place and they will not be moving. She then tells the "twos" to rotate. I usually begin with an easy set of directions like, "Twos, you will now step to the right, skip one person and land on the second person. Ready? Now rotate." With younger children you may just want them to move over one person. Again, the students share information about their artifacts, this time with a new partner. The teacher can rotate the outside circle several more times so that each student talks

The Inside-Outside Sharing Circle



to numerous other students about his or her artifact (as shown above).

This strategy allows all of the students share their artifacts within a defined amount of time. Students also get to follow compound instructions. If done at the beginning of the year, this activity can help students get to know one another. The random pairing leads children to speak with someone whom they do not know.

Artifact Brochure

Students can also create a brochure to highlight their artifact. It's easy enough to fold a piece of paper into thirds, creating a tri-fold brochure, which has six sides altogether, front and back. Then students can write out the information for their brochures, drawing pictures and cutting and pasting photographs.

Creating brochures using Microsoft Office Publisher or other brochure making software such as PrintShop is a great way to integrate both technology and language arts. To make a brochure using MS Office Publisher, click on "Publications for Print" and, from the list of options, choose "Brochures." A selection of preformatted brochures will pop up. Students can select the desired template. By clicking on the 1 or 2 at the bottom of the screen, student can see and work on the different facets of the brochure.

Whether using low- or high-tech equipment, a historical/cultural

artifact brochure should include a title, physical description of the artifact, date for the artifact, description of the significance of the artifact, and drawing and/or photograph of the artifact. I take snapshots of artifacts for students to include on their brochures. The page devoted to a description of the significance is where students can share why the artifact is so special to their history, their culture, and/or their family. The brochures are placed in our classroom library for all students to read and enjoy. In terms of literacy development, the artifact brochures make great reading material for the students in the class because they are written at an age-appropriate reading level. Reading, writing, viewing, and visually representing are the English Language Arts literacy standards addressed through this artifact sharing activity.

Artifact Timeline

In this activity, students in the class are issued a challenging problem to solve. It usually works well with students who are nine years or older. First, I ask students to write down the date that the artifact was created, acquired, or came into their lives. If the student can name a specific date (such as that of a birthday party), they should write it all down. Otherwise, an approximate year is acceptable. Then I instruct students to arrange themselves in a line across the front of the classroom that is in chronological order according to the dates of their artifacts. I designate the direction of the line (oldest items go to my far left) and tell students to carry their artifacts and time cards with them as they mill about, trying to find their correct place in the line. The creative confusion that ensues usually takes about five minutes to resolve.

To check the timeline, I ask each student to say the name and date of their artifact, beginning at the "oldest" end of the line. We whip down the line, checking for correct chronological

order.

Further mathematical thinking can be integrated into this activity by asking questions such as, "How many years have passed since ____." Or "What is the difference between ____ and ____." The teacher can demonstrate using a measuring tape to create a scale that depicts the passage of time from the earliest artifact date to the most recent (for example, by spacing the students so that 1 foot on the classroom floor = 1 year). This strategy is a powerful visual representation for students of the passage of time

Final Thoughts

Inviting students to share historical and cultural artifacts brings what is real and meaningful to students into the classroom community. Sharing artifacts encourages authentic discussion about the intimate connection students have to history and culture. Students can come to understand themselves as significant historical actors, connected to the larger historical record. This sort of lesson can have empowering and far-reaching outcomes. In terms of curriculum, the teacher has the opportunity to develop valuable literacy skills while addressing several learning standards in social studies, language arts, and math. Sharing historical and cultural artifacts is a learner-centered approach that strengthens classroom community and enhances social studies instruction for elementary school students. ■

Notes

1. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994), summarized at www.ncss.org
2. National Council of Teachers of English, *Standards for the English Language Arts* (Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1996), www.ncte.org

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